

Masks

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We were best friends. Inseparable.

Kate's house was big and in the back yard was a vast swampland. It was all a nine-year-old girl could ask for. It fed our imaginations as we romped around and played different scenarios. Most of the time, we would act like we were out in the middle of nowhere. All we had was each other and maybe a juice box we were still sipping on from lunch.

One fall day, it was particularly cold and wet. We rushed out her door to play in the swamp when the rain finally stopped. Not thirty minutes had passed when it started pouring again. We were drenched to the bone and decided we should go inside. In our rush to get inside, we took a shortcut across the swamp. As we trudged along, my rain boots, which were two sizes too big, got stuck in the mud.

"Kate, wait up!" I called. She spun around and assessed the predicament in which I seemed to always find myself.

She came back toward me as I pulled with all my might to get free of the sludge. Once Kate got to me, she bent down and tried pulling up on the boot but neither of us could release it. The swamp had claimed another victim, and being the over-dramatic little girl I was, I burst into tears. I just knew I would be a captive of the swamp for the rest of my life.

As I stood there crying, wet, shivering, and about to give up, Kate saved the day. She took off her coat and laid it down next to the boot. Since the boot was too big for me,

together we slipped my foot out and I stepped on Kate's coat. She bent down and tied it around my ankle and she helped me hobble back to her house.

Inside, her mom saw my disheveled and muddy clothes and knew my parents wouldn't be happy if they knew I was tramping around in the swamp. Kate got me a change of clothes while her mom threw mine in the washer. They were done just in time for my mom to pick me up.

My mom greeted me, smiling. "Did you have fun? What did you two do?"

Kate's mom leaned against the door frame as Kate and I exchanged looks.

"We just messed around," I said, hugging Kate goodbye.

"Where's Kate?" the youth pastor asked. "Is she not coming tonight?"

I looked up from the music I was sorting. "I'm not sure. I haven't heard from her for a couple weeks now," I replied, shrugging. Even though I kept firm control over my facial expressions, on the inside I was torn up and worried for my best friend. I called her a few times but she never picked up and she'd been skipping youth group.

"She's probably going through a lot right now, with her parents getting a divorce."

I nodded and bit my lip. The last time I was at Kate's house, we heard her parents screaming up a storm at each other. We locked ourselves in her room and huddled together on the top of her bunk bed. She cried while I wrapped my arms around her, trying to comfort her in some way.

After service, it was late and the moon was the only light outside. I was helping put the microphones and wires away when movement caught my eye. I glanced over to the door and saw Kate standing awkwardly at the entrance. She

seemed to not want to cross the threshold so I put the wires away and headed for her. I followed her to some benches not too far away.

“Why weren’t you at service? I saw your mom,” I asked, looking over my friend who had been transforming. Her style used to reflect mine – bright colors and funny sayings on t-shirts. Now all she seemed to wear was black.

Kate studied her hands in her lap.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

I saw her swallow and take a breath before dipping her hand in one of her pockets. She pulled out a small Ziploc bag and opened her hand to me. I looked down and saw the bag full of little white pills.

“What are those?” I asked, my voice thick with emotion.

“Pain killers.”

“Where did you get them?”

“My mom. I took some from her,” she mumbled.

I looked up at her, alarmed. “You stole those?”

She nodded. “Some of my friends at school told me it would be fun to pop a couple.”

I felt my heart pounding faster. “Kate, you shouldn’t do that. It’s dangerous!”

She looked up at me. “It hasn’t hurt anything. I was just having some fun.”

“What type of friends are those? You shouldn’t hang out with them anymore.”

Rage flashed in her eyes as she leapt to her feet. “Don’t tell me what to do! You aren’t my parents!”

Before I could get another word out, Kate stuffed the pills back in her pocket and bolted from the bench, running away.

Kate had been wearing long sleeves a lot lately. One day I saw what she was trying to hide. Scars crisscrossed up and down both of her arms. I didn't need to ask what happened. Even through her protests, I told my parents, who told our youth pastor.

We found ourselves sitting on a couch with our pastor sitting on a chair across from us. He sat forward with his elbows on his knees. Kate looked out the window the entire time. She barely said two words.

"Kate, you aren't even listening," I said, finally not able to take it anymore.

"That's because I don't want to hear what he has to say. I don't want to be here."

"We just want to help you, Kate. We don't want you to hurt yourself," our pastor replied, his voice calm and controlled.

"I don't need help."

With that, she stood up and left. Neither the pastor, nor I got up to stop her. I was feeling exhausted. It was almost as if I was burnt out. I tried everything to help her. I couldn't leave her alone like this but I was running out of options.

The pastor looked at me, "I understand you want to help Kate. But I'm just as worried about you as I am about her. You can't be her parent, you're fifteen years old. It's really good of you to want to help your friend, but I think you need to take a step back."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I refused to be one of the people who gave up on her.

"You're here!" Kate beamed at me. Her eyes ea-

gerly shifted to the present in my hand, then she politely looked back up at me. I smiled back.

“Happy sixteenth birthday!” I kicked off my wet sneakers and shoved my poorly wrapped present into Kate’s hands. She enthusiastically tore open the gift to reveal a DVD of Cinderella 2. I thought we were too old to be watching Disney princess movies, but Kate really wanted it.

She squealed in delight and crushed me with a hug. I followed her upstairs to her room. No one else was at her house yet because she asked me to come a half hour early. Before I knew what was happening she started tearing through her closet and dresser, throwing clothes my way.

“Here, put those on. Then I’ll do your makeup”.

She spun me around and steered me to the bathroom, shutting the door and leaving me alone. She gave me jeans to wear that had more holes and safety pins than fabric, and the shirt was black and low cut.

After figuring out how the clothes were supposed to be worn, Kate caked-on black eyeliner on my eyes, poking me a couple times. We then headed downstairs where her mom let in the other kids.

We hopped down the stairs to the basement. The smell of smoke almost made me gag as I looked thru the haze from unfamiliar face to unfamiliar face. Black clothes, chains, and too much makeup sneered back at me. I looked to Kate. Her look instantly became the same jeering, devil-may-care look the rest of the kids had.

She pushed her way to a boy who looked much older than us. He pulled away from a bong he was lighting to pull Kate into his arms and they greeted each other with a stomach-turning kiss.

I tugged nervously on my borrowed clothes, feeling very out of place in this foreign environment.

“Why do you have a DVD of Cinderella 2?” a girl scoffed, picking up the present I had just given Kate as if it were an old, smelly banana peel.-

“I have no idea. That’s so lame,” Kate finally responded.

I flinched as if Kate had physically slapped me.

It dawned on me why Kate wanted me to come to her house early.

I saw Kate’s boyfriend say something to her and she nodded.

“We will be right back. We are going up to my room,” Kate called over the room. As they headed up the steps, some people cat-called after them. I didn’t feel like being there anymore, especially if Kate wasn’t even in the same room. We all knew what they were doing up in her room and it made me mad she would put me in this situation and just leave.

A few minutes later, Kate and her boyfriend came back down the stairs.

Without looking back, I pushed my way to the stairs and ran up them two at a time. I heard Kate behind me but I didn’t stop.

“What’s wrong?” Kate called when we got to the top of the stairs. Tears streamed down my face. I stopped in my tracks and rounded on her.

“How could you do this to me?!” I shouted, never being so mad before in my life. “You left me alone with them to be with your boyfriend!”

Kate’s face flushed. “I’m sorry.”

“This isn’t me, you know that! I was always there for you when you needed me. I tried to help you but you didn’t want it. I can’t do it anymore, Kate. All you think

about is yourself. If you're going to be like this, we can't be friends anymore."

Kate stared at me, both of us crying.

"This is who I am now," she finally said.

I sucked in a breath and looked away from her. Pictures of us in various stages of our life hung on the walls.

"I'm done."

I grabbed my coat and left.

"There's mail for you on the table, sweetie," my mom called to me when I walked in the door.

"Thanks," I called to her as I took off my coat and put my keys on the table. I rubbed my cold hands together and walked into the kitchen. A single envelope was sitting in the middle of the table. I picked it up and froze at the name scribbled on the front. Kate.

The last time I spoke with her was four years ago at her birthday party. This was the last person I expected to receive mail from.

My hands shook as I yanked my finger across the thin paper and pulled out a small piece of parchment. Elegant scrolling danced across the page, inviting me to her wedding. A couple months later, I sat in my car outside the lodge where the wedding was taking place. I took a deep breath before exiting the vehicle and started up the walkway that was lined with twinkling lights. The first face I saw was that of Kate's mother. I smiled hesitantly at her and she looked at me as though she was seeing a ghost.

"It's Missy," I said. "Missy Hobson."

She blinked out of the trance she was in and nodded vigorously.

"Of course! I'll take you to Kate. She'll want to see

you.”

I followed her into the dimly lit building and down some stairs to the bridal suite.

“Kate, someone’s here to see you,” her mom said, opening the door for me as I took a step inside.

Kate and I stood looking at each other, frozen. Before I knew what was happening, she came running at me and pulled me into a tight hug, almost ridding me of breath.

“I’m so glad you made it!” she squealed. I hugged her back, numbly feeling as if I was in an episode of *Twilight Zone*.

We exchanged a few words and I perfectly played the part of the friend excited for her wedding.

I hurried back to my seat so Kate could finish getting ready. The wedding was very small, maybe thirty people, none of whom I recognized, except for family.

The music began and the procession started down the aisle. I had to hold back my laughter when I heard the music. It was loud and scary, far from traditional. It reminded me of something-I would hear in the *Lord of the Rings* movie when they enter Mordor, a place a lot like hell.

We stood for the bride as she walked down the aisle, revealing a gold dress with black lace.

It was getting late and I didn’t know anyone, so I decided to say goodbye to Kate and her new husband before leaving. I searched everywhere and finally found them outside, smoking weed together. Kate saw me, put down the joint, and rushed over to give me a hug. I told her how beautiful the wedding was and she looked ecstatic that I thought so.

“When I get back from the honeymoon, we need to meet for a drink!” she called after me.

“Sounds good.” I replied, getting in my car.

Finally alone, I sat silent in the dark. I expected myself to cry but was surprised when I cracked a smile and chuckled. I was happy, even though the wedding was a disaster. I took a sense of pleasure in the fact that Kate was still ... Kate. The music, the dress, the smoking—It was all the same Kate I knew back when we were sixteen. I took comfort in knowing that no one could change her. She told me, “This is who I am now”. And she was right, that’s who she is.

As I started my car, I knew I had no intention of meeting Kate for a drink.

And that is who I am.